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ABSTRACT

Information derived from an informal study of the processes through which students go as they complete papers assigned for class shows that most freshman students spend little time preparing for their writing and use a simple drafting technique in composition. This paper offers a model of the student composing process which is generalized from the composition diaries of 84 freshmen and 17 upperclass English majors, compares this process to an ideal model, suggests why student writing often falls short of teachers' expectations, and discusses classroom procedures which may help students more closely approach the ideal model. Diagrams of the student model and of an ideal model of the composing process are included. (JM)

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Components of the Composing Process

Sharon Crowley

Two years ago, in a meeting of the Freshman English Committee at my university, a controversy arose over the validity of our requiring in-class themes--papers which students write within the time limit of the fifty-minute class period. A colleague mentioned that the in-class themes done by his freshmen are often of better quality than those written outside of class. Another member of the committee retorted: "That's because the kids spend more time on the in-class themes."

That remark startled me at the time. Eventually I undertook an informal study to test its truth. For three semesters I asked both freshmen and advanced composition students to keep composition diaries in which they were to record the process they went through as they completed their papers for the class. I gave the students the following guidelines to use in making entries in their diaries:

1. Preparation: When did you do research in relation to writing? before? during? Did you use the research to get the idea for your own writing, or did you go to it for verification after your idea was established?

2. Incubation: When did the "writing idea" become conscious? before, during, or after another writing project? While reading? in conversation? Did the idea emerge full-blown, or did you have to drag it out of your unconscious by a process of read-write-mull or some variation of that series?

3. Writing; Do you write by hand, or use a typewriter? Do you need special instruments or conditions to work well? What approach-avoidance devices did you use to put off writing? (For example, did you justify your delay in getting started by telling yourself you needed to do more research?)

   How did the work grow? Did you begin with a thesis? Or did you simply begin writing, hoping to find a thesis? Did you draft the whole work once, or complete it by sections?

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4. Revision: How many drafts did the work go through? What kinds of changes--grammatical, logical, formal, stylistic--occurred between each draft?

The questions are based on the four-step model of the creative process proposed by Henri Poincaré in "Mathematical Creation:" this is apparently the most widely accepted model of the process currently available. I discussed this and several other models of the creative process in class, and explained to the students that they were to attempt to record the steps or events in their own writing process as faithfully as possible, and that they should not feel obligated to follow any of the proposed models. The diaries were not required, but could be submitted for extra points, or as substitutions for other work. In the end I collected 101 of these documents, 84 from freshmen, 17 from junior and senior English majors in my advanced composition classes.

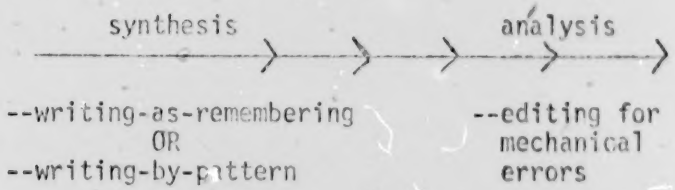
In this paper I offer a model of my students' composing process which I've generalized from their composition diaries, compare it to an ideal model derived from the remarks of professional writers and my own writing experience, and suggest from this why student writing often falls so short of our expectations. I conclude by suggesting some classroom procedures which may help students approach the ideal model more closely.

My impressionistic tabulation of the comments made in the composition diaries revealed that my cynical colleague on the Freshman English Committee was closer to the truth than I had realized. Generally, my students do little preparation for their writing. The topic or writing idea is usually generated in conversation with friends or in class. Younger students seldom do voluntary formal research beyond leafing through magazines to find "things to write about." This is not true, however, of advanced students, most of whom are

writing literary papers. These writers use library research to find support for an original thesis, or to gain perspective on it, or to find critical opinions to refute; only one student admitted he often stole his idea from professional criticism.

Most student writers draft their papers twice. The first draft is written straight through, sentence by sentence, in classic "Sherman through Georgia" fashion. No one was very explicit on how this draft came about; my impression is that usually the writing proceeds fairly swiftly once the thesis has been written down. The first draft begins with a thesis statement (probably because I seem to talk a lot about those in class) which is usually formulated only once and is not modified in substance in the course of writing-out the paper. The drafting technique of advanced writers differs somewhat; they tend to write their drafts in sections, fleshing out each sub-section of the thesis with detail, then looking for transitions to fit the whole together (this account of their process may have been suggested by the guidelines, however, rather than on their own writing practices). Only eight students mentioned using free-writing as a drafting technique, and five of these use it only to "warm up" for the hard part; they don't see freewriting as a useful tool in the invention process. Most students write the first draft by hand, on the assumption that typing is reserved for "prettying up" the final copy--only one student used the typewriter as an aid to composing. The second, and final, draft is ordinarily a neat re-copying of the first, with mechanical corrections. Some students admitted to making minor stylistic changes as they typed up a clean copy--"just to make it flow better." Younger students seldom revise extensively, and the editing they do is intended to hold the inevitable

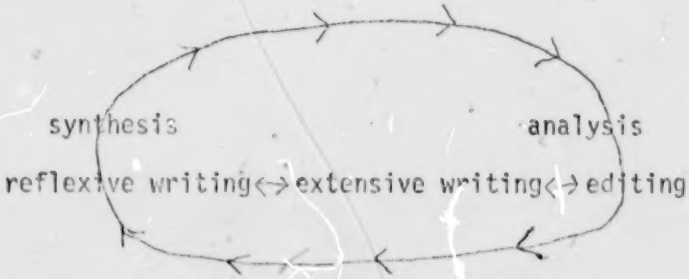
red-pencilling to a minimum. Most students said they put all of this work off until the night before the writing is due; over and over I read about a first draft being completed at one or two in the morning, and a final clean copy being typed in the morning hour or two before English class. The students' model of the composing process may be graphed as follows:



Students' writing process is strictly linear, with little or no recursive movement. Synthesis--the composing--is either automatic, a spontaneous flow of memory generated by a writing idea, or generated by the imposition of an organizational pattern--an outline of main and subordinated ideas--which dictates the flow of prose. Analysis seldom involves consideration of an audience beyond the English teacher who is conceived of as a hunter-for-mechanical-errors.

Ideally, the writing process is a recursive movement which begins with synthesis and ends with analysis. The need to synthesize ordinarily comes from some dissonance in the writer's environment, or from a clash between his hierarchy of assumptions about how the world is, and how it actually is. He writes to find the source of the dissonance. (This portion of the writing process, where the writer explores his relationship to his subject, has been labeled "reflexive writing" by Janet Emig.[1]) As the writing continues, the writer becomes conscious of an audience whose need to understand his work requires him to modify what he's written. This part of the process--extensive

writing--may be analytic, involving revision of stylistic changes, but it may also include re-synthesis. Finally, low-level analysis (editing) is done in order to make the writing accessible to readers. The whole process is not linear; it moves forward and backward between synthesis and analysis. How often this recycling occurs depends on the writer's commitment, preparation, and time limitations. The ideal model of the composing process, then, looks like this:



In his talk on the composing process at the 1975 NCTE convention, Richard Lloyd-Jones noted that "excessive pressure" on writers "produces conventional responses." I take this to mean that real, original, unconventional writing is self-sponsored; writers must, as Lloyd-Jones says, feel a need to write, knowing that they "may be enlightened in the process, even if the audience is not." In other words, writers must know the satisfaction to be derived from writing-as-discovery, as self-exploration, before quality work can be done. This sense of self-satisfaction seems to be what is chiefly lacking in my students' accounts of their own process. When they write they simply recount what they already know--which is why so many of them cannot bear to reread drafts of papers they've just written. They are not interested, are even bored by, their own work. The composition diaries show that students take very little time or care in completing writing assignments, chiefly because they feel no real commitment to the writing beyond the need to finish a chore.

They perceive the completion of a writing assignment in much the same way as they perceive an assignment requiring them to answer questions 1 through 5--one begins at the beginning and forges through to the end. I am convinced that it is this lack of commitment, and beyond that, a lack of understanding of what writing is all about, that produces the dreary stuff we all read so often--what Macrorie calls "Engfish" or what Deanna Gutschow calls writing-as-remembering, where "students call to mind images and feelings about a particular experience. What they remember initially is often confusing, vague and contradictory, and this lack of clarity comes out in the first draft. It is also likely to contain 'verbal shorthand,' which means more to the writer than to the reader. Another problem is that the pattern of emphasis in the first version of a paper is often inadequate, largely because a student begins the paper at a point too early in the experience, or uses too much detail, often irrelevant, in the initial process of verbalizing it. Then, by the time the student reaches the most significant part, he or she has begun to run out of energy (and time), and the detail grows thinner and thinner. The paper becomes expository summary . . . . The pattern of emphasis in the first version, in other words, is shaped more often by a student's declining energy and deadline, than by a critical sense."[2]

Now, I suppose much of this can be blamed on the academic context in which students' writing is done, with its attendant machinery of grades, assignments, due dates, and other pressures which produce "conventional responses." Admittedly, the ideal model of the writing process cannot often be approximated within the time limitations of an academic semester; but surely we can come much closer than we have. I have developed several means for doing this in the classroom which have met with limited success.

Most of these activities center on making students conscious that they work through a process when they write. I present several models of the process in class, and we discuss how closely each approximates the students' memories of their private processes. Heuristics, or problem-solving procedures like those found in Young, Becker, and Pike's Rhetoric: Discovery and Change help students to become aware of the need for a systematic approach to thinking through a problem.[3] The composition diaries are an important means of helping students to understand the vagaries and wanderings of their minds as they compose; when students keep these faithfully and reread them occasionally they learn to avoid situations that trap them into non-composing. In class, we write together, as a whole group or in smaller ones. One portion of the class is asked to watch what happens while we work, rather than participating in the writing. These students report on the steps involved in the group's generation of the writing. When we evaluate papers in class, we emphasize the writer's psychologic, rather than the paper's logic, making comments such as this: "This writer found his true thesis near the end of the writing--the first four paragraphs are only warm-ups." All of these techniques help students to understand their composing process better, and to become more comfortable when writing since the experience is no longer so foreign to them.

ENDNOTES

[1] Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana: NCTE, 1971), p. 91.

[2] Deanna M. Gutschow, "Stopping the March Through Georgia," in On Righting Writing, ed. Ouida H. Clapp (Urbana: NCTE, 1975), p. 96.

[3] Alton Young, Richard Becker, and Kenneth Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1970), p. 127.